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ABSTRACT

While an individual in his own culture is expected to have a stable self concept, one who is placed in a totally different context may experience difficulties because ideas about self in the old society are no longer appropriate in the new one. In order to survive, the individual has to redefine his self concept to make it more functional in the new environment, while retaining the old cultural values. Asians in American society have made such adjustments in self concept. Most previous studies of Asian American self concept, however, have focused on the Westernization of the Asian without considering the influence of traditional culture on self concept development. The few studies that do look at cultural influences tend to generalize observations for all Asians and neglect ethnic group differences. To a large extent, the tendency to generalize stems from translation difficulties where, for instance, the same English term is used to translate Japanese, Chinese, and Filipino terminologies for value concepts that are similar but have unique connotations within their particular contexts. In view of these cultural differences, it is important that studies of Asian American self concept focus on cultural retention more than on Asian assimilation into American culture. (Author/MJL)

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ASIAN AMERICAN SELF-CONCEPT

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The concept of self is a construct which has been held in common with many different academic disciplines. Psychology, sociology, social psychology, anthropology, social welfare, and political science have delved substantially into defining and analyzing self-concept. These disciplines have generally looked at the subject as an extremely complex variable which is hard to accurately pinpoint and describe. Individual scholars, such as Mead, Cooley, Erickson, Allport, and Shibutani, have expressed and written their perceptions of the constructs.

There is general consensus on self-concept as being a broad encompassing topic which involves the individual, the individual's self-perception, the individual's world, the individual's perception of the world, and the world's perception of the individual (Erikson, 1968; Goffman, 1975; Mead, 1937). There variables, in some combination, determine the self-concept of the individual.

Consequently, self-concept can be described as a very complex interactional process of continuing interpretive activity. It is based on an individual's existence in the real world. Self-concept is a subjective perception of sonscious understanding. This perception relies on reflexive and non-reflexive thinking, understanding, evaluating, planning, and perceiving. Through this stream of conscious thought arises the construction of a personal self-conception (Lauer/Handel, 1977).

The actual construction of self-concept can be seen as a three-part process. The first part of the process is the development of a self-image through the definition of one's self

as what one sees or thinks one is. The second is based upon the concept of what one is, i.e., self-esteem, which represents how one regards oneself. The third component is the ideal self, which is the imaginative construction of what one ought to or wants to be (Lauer/Handel, 1977).

With an understanding that the concept of self affects all everyday behavior and beliefs comes the realization that it is an indispensable component to the existence of human social life. Self-concept is established and continued through social interaction with others. This social interaction continually validates, verifies, and reinforces the self-concept that has been established (Robbins, 1973).

The construction of self-concept can be described as a conscious understanding of the existence of an individual in the real world. This effort can be seen as preserving and enhancing the internal self while, in a social context, achieving a relatively stable self-characteristic.

Most of the studies in social science literature have designated self-concept and identity to be broad human concepts with generalizable characteristics applicable to any social medium or culture. In any given society, the construction and maintenance of social, institutional, personal norms, and beliefs governing self-concept are considered universal. Through this comes the understanding that the establishment of self-concept is consistent cross-culturally.

In a general sense, this analysis is adequate for under-

standing an individual's self-concept. This is especially true when dealing with an average person from a certain culture within the context of that culture. For instance, a white Anglo-Saxon protestant in American society or a Japanese in Japanese society would have a stable self-concept with relatively few problems. The self-concept development would be similar enough to draw parallel analyses, even though there are extreme differences in the two cultures. This means that there are culturally consistent self-concepts which are contextually valid and yet remain culturally specific.

But what happens when an individual is taken out of context and placed in a totally different society and culture? Problems arise because conceptions and expectations of self no longer "fit" in the new society. Because of this lack of "fitness," the construction and maintenance of an individual's self-concept suffers.

The specificities of self-concept vary in different cultures, because they are determined by specific combinations of variables. These variables are governed by the society and environment in which the individual is nurtured. Because these specific variables are not always congruent or applicable in cross-cultural situations, problems develop for those who move outside the boundaries of their culture. The governing cultural constructs which guide the individual are no longer totally appropriate for the new environment in which the individual is placed.

In the case where an individual is found in a situation of

dealing with two distinctly different cultures simultaneously, the person must balance the appropriate cultural responses for a person's existence. To survive in this situation, the individual must draw the appropriate responses from one culture and apply the responses to the other culture. This situation creates a cultural conflict and often results in a redefinition of one's self-concept which is more functional in the new environment.

Upon entering a new society, the individual is placed in a transitional orientation between the new and the old cultures. This transitional orientation is not limited to one generation but continues to lesser degrees in subsequent generations. This process allows culturally specific variables to be passed on over a period of time.

Through time, these cultural variables may undergo the necessary changes to remain functional and viable to the individual and the individual's existence in society. The end result of the cultural process is the production of an ethnic self-concept which is rooted or based in a specific cultural, ethnic context. It can be traced to its derivative culture and can exist in a different cultural environment. Ideally, through this process, the self-concept continues to become more functional and viable to the new society in which it exists.

When an individual maintains some degree of cultural retention, he or she exists in a situation that can be determined as cross-cultural. To analyze the individual's situation of of cultural alteration and change, the originating cultural base must be examined in order to trace the vestigial charac-

teristics. By understanding these cultural characteristics of an individual's self-concept, a more appropriate way of dealing with such individuals can be developed. To better understand how this process works, the case of the Asian Americans will be inspected.

In a general overview of works written on Asian Americans, one trend becomes apparent. This trend involves the placement of the Asian American individual almost totally into the context of American society and tries to analyze how the Asian American individual fits into that society. Rather than looking at the specific cultural heritage of the Asian American, he or she is placed into the general context of white America and measured for his or her successful or unsuccessful assimilation. This theoretical framework is not conducive to the understanding of the Asian American self-concept or identity, but rather how well the Asian American can fit in white American social structure.

The problems with most works on Asian American self-concept is their focus has been centered on the ability of the individual to acquire western traits rather than trying to isolate those specific cultural elements which are based upon Asian roots and are essential parts in the development of an Asian American self-concept. This view takes the assimilation/acculturation model as its basis which inherently stresses the importance of the acquisition of the American culture. By doing so, this presents a situation where Asian traits are viewed negatively and are counteractants to full Americanization.

Asian traits are viewed as archaic, non-functional, conservative, and barriers to an American understanding of self-identity. Probably the most prime example of this type of analysis is Sue and Sue's "Chinese American Personality and Mental Health" (1971). In this article, the Sues develop three psychological constructs: the Marginal man, the traditionalist, and the Asian American. These constructs are based upon the amount of Americanization of the individuals. In their model of personality development, the Sues allow for very little documentation of specific cultural traits that would influence the establishment of Chinese American identity or self-concept.

The Sues' conception of Chinese American identity is based on an internally oriented western psychodynamic view, rather than one which considers the contextual, social, and historical aspects of the individual. As pointed out by Tong (Tong, 1971), the Sues' explanation does not allow for the development of a specific cultural history which is reflective of experience in China and the United States. Consequently, the Sues' explanation is misleading, because it leaves out the integral functions of specific Chinese cultural values that are critical to understanding the unique Chinese American self-concept and identity. In this way, the Sues, as well as many other authors (Weiss, 1970; Lyman, 1971), have left out the specific influences of cultural retention factors.

For example, Melford Weiss' (Weiss, 1970) paper on interracial dating dwells on the assimilation process as the key measure of self-concept rather than the aspects of cultural

retention. Another version of the assimilation model is the "Success Story" model (Lyman, 1971; U.S. News and World Report, 1966) which shows how Asians are outwhiting the whites. Items of cultural retention are not discussed.

Unfortunately, most of the research done on Asian Americans fall into the models described above. This view implies that conceptions relating to identity which support views other than those supporting western or American idioms are not considered appropriate for understanding the individual. These definitions are usually insensitive to the non-western concepts of culture and lifestyle. This ideology does not allow for the development of alternate cultural constructions which would be specific and sensitive to understanding other non-western cultures, such as those of the Asian American. These broad, general characterizations are based on western understandings and value judgments of Asian American cultures. They do not adequately attend to the realities and experiences of the Asian American cultures as they exist today.

There have been some attempts at viewing the Asian cultural retention factor. However, many of these have attempted to visualize all Asian American cultures as a generalizable group with similar characteristics. They have focused on the commonality of western and Asian cultural aspects with little distinction for specific differences. They tend to look at common traits, such as shame, guilt, filial piety, family, or obligation, as common to all Asian American groups. Although those concepts do exist in the specific cultures, these English

renditions often end in a dilute feeling of the actual Asian American construct. These generalities can lead to stereotypes and misunderstandings rather than a more definitive picture.

Most research on Asian Americans, then, have proceeded to transfer the eastern cultural conceptions and values into general English references of western ideology. Usage of such terminology as filial piety or obligation depicts the influences of Asian cultures. Yet, many of the specific, culturally relative forms cannot be directly or adequately translated-into English. When such a situation occurs, the English definition can essentially take the term out of cultural context. This definition does not reasonably reflect the affectual cultural value of the concept and, therefore, does not reflect accurately the usage by the individual in society.

What is needed are culturally appropriate responses which place the Asian American individual in the context of his or social cultural reality. This reality should be based on a specific Asian cultural heritage which has been tempered with the experience in American culture.

There have been some authors who have written on the retention of Asian cultural traits which have been influential in the construction of the specific Asian American self-concepts. For instance, DeVos and Caudill (1956), Kitano (1976), Yanigisako (1978), Hsu (1971), Tseng (1980), Tashima and Tashima (1979), and others have tried to trace ethnic words and phrases to their cultural origin to exemplify how they have been altered and maintained to fit American society. More recently, Ron

Tanaka's "Circle of Ethnicity" (unpublished paper) analyzes the sansei (third generation Japanese American) and their construction of self. He does this by studying the sansei and their Americanism, combined with their retention and alteration of Japanese cultural tendencies.

By looking at some of these specific cultural aspects, in their native form, a development of a more accurate representation of Asian American self-concept and identity can be initiated. Some of the cultural values of the Japanese and Pilipino groups will be observed.

Some authors have expressed the cultural importance of the development of Japanese terminology for understanding the Japanese American self. For instance, a term used to describe the household is called ie. Ie refers to the Japanese extended family and the institutional relationship which exists with it (Kitano, 1976). Within the context of ie are other values, such as oyakoko (Kitano, 1976). Oyakoko reflects a characteristic that is found in many Asian cultural groups: the social institution of filial piety. This reflects the reciprocal obligation of parent to child and child to parent. Closely related is the term on, which means the incurring of a kind of psychological burden as a result of incurring a favor (Doi, 1978). Again, reflective of the value of the ie is ninjo, which is a spontaneously arising feeling (Doi, 1978), or a human feeling (Lebra, 1976). This can be seen as a spontaneous relationship that a mother or child has or one incurred between blood relatives. Giri connotes a moral obligation towards others (Kitano, 1976) or an ascribed obliga-

tion which arises from a feeling similar to that of ninjo. Giri is different than ninjo, because the feeling does not rise spontaneously and has to be developed between two individuals.

Amaeru means to depend or rely on one another's benevolence (Doi, 1976). This acts as a formal structure which binds individuals together. It reinforces the feelings established in on, ninjo, and giri. Enryo is depicted as a restrain or holding back. It is used as a negative yardstick in measuring the intimacy of human relationships (Doi, 1976). Jibun ga aru, "to have self", and jibun ga nai, "to have no self", (Doi, 1976) refers to becoming submersed in a group to a point of subsuming the self for the benefit of the group. Gaman can be seen as sticking things out or not complaining or crying out when a situation is bad or painful. Gaman is also considered the suppression of fear (Kitano, 1976). Hazukashi is observed in terms of embarrassment and reticence (Kitano, 1976) in which the feeling is developed through observation and influence of others' actions which limit social behavior. Hige reflects an attempt to verbally denigrate or lower one's image by response because Japanese norms preclude praise of self or family in public (Kitano, 1976). Shi ka ta ga nai essentially states that whatever has happened cannot be helped, or there is nothing else to be said.

As with the Japanese Americans, the Pilipino Americans can be seen to have distinct culturally specific terms which are directly applicable to the development of their identity and self-concept. For instance, amor propio (Ponce, 1980) can be loosely translated as self-esteem. However, it is an evaluative tool

which sensitizes the individual to his status with his group. Hiya can be described as shame or embarrassment. "But the English words are inadequate to convey the full extent of the term's meaning. It is a form of self-deprecation, involving embarrassment, inferiority and shyness all arising from having behaved improperly" (Ponce, 1980, p. 161). Utang ng loob is a debt for a voluntary favor which must be repaid at some time but cannot be repaid in money and perhaps never in full. It takes on the connotation of a moral obligation and failure to fulfill this obligation is shameful or walang hiya (without shame) (Ponce, 1980). Utang ng loob is a debt of gratitude. Pakikisama is defined as getting along harmoniously with people. This is maintained throughout social relationships and categorizes the Pilipino as being sensitive and aware of the sensitivity of others (Ponce, 1980). Bahala na means leaving things to fate, or that God has control over destiny (Ponce, 1980). Panagkakadua is defined as neighborliness in Ilocano (a Pilipino dialect). It dictates a feeling or behaving with goodwill and responsibility to others (Forman, 1980).

However, in the case of the Chinese, one of the largest Asian American groups, there is a startling lack of information concerning such cultural values. Although there is documentation in English, such as tight-knit communities, working together, obligations, filial piety, shame, and embarrassment, there have been few, if any, writings which concern the specific cultural traits in Chinese with an English definition. Francis Hsu has discussed the influence of jin and jen as the human constant

(Hsu, 1973), but there has been relatively little documentation of anything else.

The Japanese and Pilipino terms which have been described here are but loose translations of very complex and intertwined cultural terminology. These definitions do reflect some general similarities between differeing Asian American cultures. For instance, the Pilipino term amor proprio constitutes somewhat of the same feeling generated in the Japanese concepts of jibun ga aru and jibun ga nai. These terms reflect the development of self within the context of the group and how that elicits responses from the individual. Walan hiya, hiya, and hazukashi all refer to the sentiments of shame or embarrassment as mechanisms of social control. Utang ng loob, on, giri, and ninjo all reflect the establishment and continuation of some type of social obligation in the context of their respective societies. Amaeru shows a general tendency which resembles those shown in pakikisama and panagkakadua, which show the importance of interdependency between others in society. Finally, bahala na and shi ka ta ga nai reflect a general feeling of fatelessness or non-control over the events of life.

Although there are general similarities in the English translations of the Japanese and Pilipino terminology, it is intensely important to note the distinct cultural differences which affectually separate the definitions of each specific ethnic group. This means that out of cultural context, the English translations of the specific cultural terms seem to reflect the same type of image. However, when placed in their

appropriate affectual settings, there are significantly different cultural definitions for guidance in social interaction. This reinforces the concept of an ethnic individual's self-concept which is crucially determined by the development of distinct cultural settings.

Such terms exist as a reality for the first generation of Asian Americans. The terms, for them, are still held in the specific nature of the native culture. They may have been altered, in affect, to function in American society, but they remain intact. For those generations following these immigrants, the cultural traits can still be recognized. Though diluted by their interaction with American cultural values, they are still apparent in vestigial traces.

By analyzing these culturally specific traits, we can determine the importance of the Asian cultural values on Asian Americans today. The question of self-concept for the Asian American should be determined by how much specific cultural retention exists, rather than attempting to determine the amount of Americanization attained. Unfortunately, definite problems arise in determining the amount of cultural vestiges, because many of the cultural vestiges have become subsumed by the English workings of the Asian American world. Hence, the immigrant, as well as succeeding generations, will possess the evolved vestiges of such cultural traits. These vestiges remain intact, altered and diluted in an English form, but they are still distinguishable and identifiable in America.

Without understanding such concepts of self, we can only

skim the general aspects of personality to more fully understand such concepts. We must produce a more definitive awareness of cross-cultural situations and the individual's place in them. We need to analyze and develop the culture-specific concepts of self in order to formulate better modes of treatment and understanding for those who need them. More importantly, we must develop these concepts in conjunction with community advocacy research which will provide usefulness and functionality to such endeavors. Without such a firm basis of understanding, we can never adequately face the problems or attempt to understand the Asian American individual today.

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